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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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The Birds themselves

Wayne Longmore (Queensland Museum). History of the Australian Night Parrot and its recent re-discovery after many years of presumed extinction (with, it is hoped, a personal appearance by the bird skin itself). Ian Wallace (Liverpool Museum). The history of the Liver Bird, Liverpool's famous emblem (complete with a distinguished specimen which for many years was in Liverpool's Town Hall).

The Liver Bird also adorns several important buildings in Liverpool, and a trail incorporating these works of art will be devised - with the added benefit of a self-guided tour of the city centre. Time permitting, a group tour will be fitted in on Sunday afternoon

Hunting and Collecting

Mike Stammers (Maritime Museum, National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside). The history and use of Duck Punts.

Janet Kear (Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust). Duck decoys.

Pat Morris (Royal Bedford College, London). The history of bird taxidermy.

Ornithologists

Mike Thomas (Perth Museum). Drummond-Hay, First President of the British Ornithologists' Union.

Bob Ralph (University of Aberdeen). John MacGillivray, ship's naturalist and collector.

Peter Bircham (University of Cambridge). John Legg 1755-1802, an advanced ornithologist.

The history of Bird art

This section is being overseen by one of Britain's most distinguished bird artists, Robert Gillmore, who will give an introductory talk on bird art. We are also hoping to arrange a small exhibition of bird art for sale at the conference.

Other talks will include:

Peter Davis (Hancock Museum, Newcastle-on-Tyne) on Thomas Bewick, wood-engraver.

Professor Bill Hale (Liverpool Polytechnic). Fine bird books.

We are trying to obtain sponsorship for a special edition of **Archives of Natural History** for the papers from this conference. We would also like to be able to support some of the foreign speakers' travelling expenses, and delegates who may not otherwise be able to attend. We would welcome suggestions or offers of sources of funding.

The facilities at the conference will also include room

for poster papers and a comprehensive book stall run by Natural History Book Service of Totnes, Devon. There will also be a sales stall run by the British Ornithologists' Union, at which their publications will be available.

Sunday, 20th September

Particularly to complement Dr Kear's paper, we will be visiting Hale Duck Decoy, on the banks of the Mersey in south Liverpool. This is an SSSI and an Ancient Monument, and has one renovated pipe of the several formerly used for trapping duck. It is now a nature reserve run jointly by the Cheshire and Lancashire Trusts for Nature Conservation.

We hope that Sunday afternoon will also give us enough time for a guided tour of Liverpool's Liver Birds and interesting buildings, including the majestic tea-room of The Adelphi Hotel.

The cost of the whole conference will be in the region of £135 for the four days, including transport to Knowsley Hall, Liverpool City Library, Liverpool Museum and Hale Duck Decoy and packed lunches on those days. The conference centre is set in landscaped grounds about five miles south of the city centre and is self contained; bedrooms, lecture halls, dining room and bar are all within minutes walk.

Full booking forms will be sent out in 1992. If you wish to be included on the mailing list, send your name, address and telephone number to: Clem Fisher, Liverpool Museum, William Brown Street, Liverpool L3 8EN. Please indicate if you would like to offer a paper or poster presentation, and if you would be a residential or non-residential delegate.

Stop Press

An attempt to steal eggs from the first floor stores at the Booth Museum in Brighton was recently foiled by super sleuth (and geologist) John Cooper. The following report from the Brighton Evening Argus says it all.

Butcher snatched rare museum eggs

A wildlife enthusiast was caught by staff stealing rare birds' eggs from a natural history museum.

When police searched Anthony Coleman's home they found an illegal collection of stuffed, dead birds, Brighton magistrates heard.

Coleman, 26, of Beaconsfield Road, Hastings, admitted burglary at the Booth Museum in Dyke Road, Brighton. Coleman, a butcher, also admitted having a dead kestrel, long-eared owl and a buzzard, in breach of the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Esme Grant, prosecuting, said museum staff found Coleman in an exhibit storeroom cordoned off from the public with a bag filled with rare birds' eggs. He told police he stole the eggs because he had not wanted to take them from the wild.

Anne Markwick, defending, said: "He is a wildlife enthusiast. In itself this is a very harmless hobby but he was under stress because he was separated at the time from his wife." Miss Markwick said Coleman was completely ignorant that he had the stuffed birds illegally. She said by law the dead birds should have been registered with the Department of the Environment and the owner has to show how they died.

He bought the birds, which were in cages, eight years ago from a junk shop and because he could not say how they died he had to plead guilty. Coleman was fined £250 for stealing the eggs and £75 for having the stuffed birds.

Note from Editor: the culprit was apprehended almost by chance on a Sunday afternoon. John Cooper happened to be walking through the museum with an attendant when they heard the floor creak above their heads. No-one should have been there, so they investigated and caught the man red-handed.

Since then, the access stairs to the stores have been enclosed to prevent anyone from climbing in and security has been tightened generally. It is also likely that the Booth Museum will be offered the culprit's illegal collection.

The only really mystifying aspect to this whole affair is: what was John Cooper doing walking through his museum on Sunday afternoon when he should have been at home watching footy on the telly!

Have you seen a mermaid? Do you have a mermaid in your collections?

Do you know of any mermaids in other collections?

If so we would like to hear from you., We are conducting a survey of mermaids, and mermen, and would like to know about any material (extant or destroyed) that may be known to you. References in local publications, ephemera, manuscript notes and correspondence may provide important clues to the whereabouts of specimens - if your collections include any references to merfolk we would be very interested to hear from you. Even records of specimens you may have seen elsewhere would be appreciated.

David Heppell and Geoff Swinney
National Museums of Scotland
Chambers Street
Edinburgh EH1 1JF
(Please address your response to David Heppell)

Manual of Natural History Curatorship

**Editors: Geoff Stansfield, John Mathias,
Gordon Reid**

At a recent meeting in the Museums and Galleries Commission of the editorial sub-committee for the Manual of Natural History Curatorship, at which most of the contributors were present, the following outline for the Manual was agreed. In fact, most contributors have now expanded this outline into a detailed breakdown of contents for their chapters, and two of the chapters have already been written. The bulk of the meeting was spent going through the details of chapter contents and ironing out possible areas of overlap between contributors. The Manual is to be published by HMSO and is being supported financially by the Museums and Galleries Commission. We are looking for publication by the end of the year.

Outline of contents and contributors

1 Function and organization of NHM's
Functions and organization of natural history museums to include national, local authority, university and private museums, their individual characteristics as far as funding, administration and functions.

Geoff Stansfield